# TESTIMONY BY CATHERINE SCHRECK OF THE SITE INTELLIGENCE GROUP

December 24, 2021

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## 1. Introduction

My name is Catherine Schreck. I am the Team Leader for Violent Extremism and Terrorism and Fundraising at SITE Intelligence Group, a leading non-governmental counter terrorism organization specializing in tracking and analyzing online activity of global extremist communities.

I have over ten years of combined work and academic experience in open-source intelligence, data collection, documentation, and interpretation of terrorist communications, with a focus on al-Qaeda in Syria and the Middle East. I am fluent in Arabic, French, and Spanish as well as a native English speaker. I hold a Masters in International Relations from the University of London and a Masters in Empires, Colonialism and Globalization from the London School of Economics. I have been employed at SITE since 2018.

At SITE, I have researched and lead hundreds of investigations into terrorist and violent extremist threat actors and incidents worldwide. I have conducted numerous briefings to government entities on extremist and terrorist trends ranging from Syrian armed groups to the so-called lone wolf attacks in Europe and the U.S. As Team Leader for Terrorism and Finance, I oversee all monitoring and analysis of content from various extremist and terrorist actors related to online terrorist financing and fundraising, including transaction methods (cryptocurrency, crowdfunding, money transfer, etc.) and online promotional techniques (illegitimate charities, coded language, etc.).

As per the request of the Middle District of Tennessee, United States Department of Justice, I have prepared an expert report on how terrorist entities operate online to solicit funds and other support for foreign fighters affiliated with FTOs. In the following sections, I will provide a background on how SITE Intelligence Group conducts research, an explanation of the role of the messenger application Telegram in facilitating terrorist communications, a detailed account of the role of so-called "charities" such as Merciful Hands and Al Sadaqah in raising funds for FTO-affiliated fighters, and a description of the type of information that members in these specific online communities, including the defendant, are exposed to and hence would be aware of with regard to the connections and beneficiaries of these "charities."

#### 1.1 Background on SITE Intelligence Group

SITE Intelligence Group, incorporated in Maryland as a woman-owned small business in 2007, has established a one-of-a-kind reputation for tracking, studying, and analyzing the online networks of terrorist and violent extremist communities worldwide.

SITE currently provides monitoring and analysis to nearly 100 government entities spanning five continents, including numerous federal, state, and local actors in the U.S. government. This

includes criminal justice entities, law enforcement, counterterrorism units, defense forces and institutions, intelligence agencies, secret/protective services, fusion centers, embassies, border patrol/immigration entities, and crisis centers. Private sector partners span an array of sectors, including the largest tech, financial, and pharmaceutical companies. In addition, SITE Intelligence provides its information to think tanks, policy institutions, humanitarian organizations, and academic institutions.

SITE's Executive Director, Rita Katz, has an established reputation as one of the world's most credible terrorism and extremism experts. Ms. Katz worked closely with the National Security Council in the aftermath of 9/11, provided critical data and testimony in support of major prosecutions, and worked successfully with the world's largest social media companies and U.S. agencies to effectively end ISIS' online recruitment capabilities (please see bio attached). In 2003, Ms. Katz received special recognition from FBI Director Robert Mueller for her "outstanding assistance to FBI in connection with its investigative efforts."

#### 1.2 Methodology

At SITE Intelligence Group, we rely on human expertise to conduct open-source intelligence (OSINT) to monitor and assess terrorist behavior and activities.

SITE's methodology is to follow, collect, save, and analyze terrorist and extremist online content through targeted and mapped navigation of networks using human intelligence, rather than through artificial intelligence or randomly aimed cold searches on the Internet.

SITE monitors groups and individuals that meet the selection criteria for what constitutes terrorism and/or violent extremism. Namely, this includes online content directly produced by, linked to, or supportive of formal governmental/intergovernmental terrorist designations and/or widely recognized extremist/terrorist threats, movements, and individuals.

SITE analysts monitor content across publicly accessible social media and online communication platforms. Often, this content is located on sources that require a login or some other negotiated access. This involves creating an account to access specific social media platforms, and/or locating invitations, posted on public social media venues, to specific moderated communities, such as invite-only groups, messaging services, or message boards. In these cases, entry/invitation links (channels, chat groups, etc.) are published by the groups and across publicly accessible social media platforms. Groups often use one platform to promote corresponding accounts, channels, or chat groups on other platforms. No action undertaken by SITE staff violates the terms of service of any platform monitored.

#### 1.3 The Role of Telegram in Facilitating Terrorism Communication

In the mid-2010s, mainstream platforms such as Twitter and YouTube began implementing severe content moderation policies aimed at curbing terrorist use of their platforms. Terrorist networks responded by migrating to alternate platforms, and by the end of 2015, the messenger application Telegram became the most commonly preferred communication platform for designated terrorist organizations such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, as well as their support networks. Telegram offers a combination of features that are ideal toward structured media publication, widespread dissemination of content, recruitment, and creation of online communities that organize real-world action.

Telegram provides a service whereby users can create 'channels' and 'groups.' 'Channels' allow administrators to effectively broadcast material, be that in imagery, documentation, audio, or video to their member audience. 'Groups' allow members to chat with one another, and participant information is visible to all members. Groups and channels can be set up as either private or public. Channel and group creators name their channel and are able to have multiple channels and groups at their disposal at any given time. Users can engage in encrypted direct messaging.

Most importantly, channel administrators and group members post invitation links for other users to access their material, and this material can be, and often is, shared between other channels, groups, and users. This cross-dissemination of invitation links and material enables an interconnected web of groups and users who are deeply immersed and well informed of the agenda, ideology, and intentions of these networks.

#### 1.4 About this Document

This document details instances of or pertaining to terrorist fundraising relevant to the case brought forth by the prosecution. As such, the following sections provide background information on the international community's post-9/11 efforts to stop terrorist fundraising and the very different terrorist landscape seen today—in many ways most visibly out of Syria.

From here, this document examines three terrorist fundraising operations run out of Syria: The Merciful Hands, Abu Ahmed Foundation, and Al Sadaqah. These sections will focus on these entities' activities from 2018 so as to keep information relevant to the case. Examining these groups within this specific timespan will also give a sense of key events, circumstances, and outreach trends in the Syrian jihad which would influence individuals' choices to donate to such groups.

# 2. Relevant Background on Terrorist Fundraising

Nefarious charities have played no small part in keeping terrorist networks alive in recent decades. Exhaustive investigations by the international community in the last 20 years have uncovered complex, international fundraising networks helping to power some of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations. Yet, for all the progress made against such entities, emerging technologies and conflicts of recent years have given way to new types of terrorist-linked charities that break with the characteristics and operative conventions of past decades.

#### 2.1 Post-9/11 Action against Terrorist Charities

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President Bush signed into action Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, purposed to disrupt terrorists' financing networks by freezing assets and designating such individuals and entities. Via the authorities granted by E.O. 13224—in complement to President Clinton's E.O. 12947 from 1995—the U.S. government designated more than 40 foreign and domestic charities by 2005, while also identifying designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) appearing to operate under charity-branded fronts. The U.S. Treasury has stated of the charities within the scope of E.O. 13224 and E.O. 12947:

Ensuing investigations revealed terrorist abuse of charitable organizations and donors, both in the United States and worldwide, often through the diversion of donations intended for humanitarian purposes but funneled instead to support terrorist organizations and operations...A critical element of both the national and global campaign against terrorist financing is to designate those individuals and entities, including corrupted charitable organizations, that support terrorist activity.<sup>3</sup>

These U.S. initiatives were carried out in partnership with the international community. In 2001, the United Nations adopted Resolution 1373, requiring member states to prevent and suppress terrorist financing and reaffirming commitment to related resolutions of years past.<sup>4</sup> The Resolution required in part that member states:

Prohibit their nationals or any persons and entities within their territories from making any funds, financial assets or economic resources or financial or other related services available, directly or indirectly, for the benefit of persons who commit or attempt to commit or facilitate or participate in the commission of terrorist acts, of entities owned or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Pages/protecting-charities\_exec-orders.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res\_1373\_english.pdf

controlled, directly or indirectly, by such persons and of persons and entities acting on behalf of or at the direction of such persons<sup>5</sup>

As Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Kenneth W. Dam stated to Congress in 2002, these newly bolstered anti-terrorism initiatives shed new light on how the appearance of charitable giving "has been used to provide a cover for the financing of terror." Among such entities to do so was Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), a U.S.-based charity that maintained offices around the world, including Bosnia, Chechnya, Pakistan, China, Ingushetia, and Russia. While the group billed its work as humanitarian-focused, both the U.S. Treasury and United Nations deemed BIF as a terrorist organization in 2002, citing evidence of the group and its leader's close ties to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

BIF was just one of many examples of charities supporting terrorism under the guise of humanitarian objectives. Other noteworthy examples included the Saudi Arabia-based Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), which the United Nations called "one of the principal NGOs active throughout the world providing support for the Al-Qaida network." Its Indonesia branch was understood to be a critical lifeline for regional groups like the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, whose operatives carried out the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta, and other deadly events. AHIF's Somali branch was likewise found funneling money to an al-Qaeda-linked organization called Al Itihaad al Islamiya (AIAI) via what it claimed to be school and orphanage-building operations. <sup>11</sup>

Other charities investigated in these years underscored the massive scale of the problem at hand. In December of 2001, the U.S. designated The Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development (HLF), which was then the largest Muslim charity in America, for providing "millions of dollars of material and logistical support" to the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas. HLF's funds reportedly went toward "encouraging children to become suicide bombers and to recruit suicide bombers by offering support to their families." The following year, the U.S. 13 and United Nations 4 designated The Global Relief Foundation (GRF) for its ties to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg89957/html/CHRG-107shrg89957.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/po3632.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/po3632.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\_sanctions\_list/summaries/entity/benevolence-international-foundation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\_sanctions\_list/summaries/entity/al-haramain-foundation-%28indonesia%29

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg89957/html/CHRG-107shrg89957.htm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> https://web.archive.org/web/20130602150934/http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Documents/designationsum-.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/po3553.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\_sanctions\_list/summaries/entity/global-relief-foundation-%28grf%29

Even beyond 9/11's immediate aftermath, terrorist charities persisted in shielding their illicit activities within larger portfolios of humanitarian work, genuine or otherwise. Daniel L. Glaser, formerly a Deputy Assistant at the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, emphasized to Congress in 2010 how these humanitarian-centered veneers often deterred due legal recourse:

By providing genuine relief and development services – as nearly all of the charities associated with terrorist organizations do – these charities benefit from public support, generating reluctance by many governments to take enforcement action against them.<sup>15</sup>

Between 2001 and 2017, the U.S. Treasury designated more than 25 charities (not including their individual branches) linked to al-Qaeda, 11 linked to Hamas, five linked to Hezbollah, and three linked to other groups. These charities have spanned the globe, including Western countries like the U.S., France, and United Kingdom; Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon and Iran; South Asian nations like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; Balkan countries like Bosnia and Albania; and Sub-Saharan African countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. 16

However, while the international community made major achievements in identifying and shutting down terrorist-linked charities in this time, the early and mid-2010s gave way to terrorist fundraising entities that operated by vastly different methods.

#### 2.2 A New Category of Terrorist-Funding Charities

The Syrian Civil War, social media, and emerging online financial technologies have given way to radically different forms of terrorist fundraising. Instances of Internet age terrorist fundraising range from Hezbollah's "Equip a Mujahid" social media fundraising campaign in 2017<sup>17</sup> to an individual reportedly selling fake medical masks amid the coronavirus pandemic to fundraise for the Islamic State (ISIS) the same year.<sup>18</sup>

This new landscape has also given way to rapidly created terrorist-linked charities that, in many ways, are far easier to establish and far less accountable than similarly intentioned charities of past decades. In addition, these entities often give little in the way of verification pertaining to their identities and activities. While these entities are often referred to as *charities* and *organizations* (as this document does), they do not meet the criteria of registered, recognized NGOs and humanitarian organizations, and thus require far looser definitions of these terms.

https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Documents/FINAL%20GLASER%20TESTIMONY%20ON%20CHARITIES%205-26-2010%20edited%20PDF.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Pages/protecting-fto.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/04/25/hezbollah-fundraising-underscores-its-financial-crisis/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1304296/download

Social media and messenger platforms like Telegram allow jihadist fundraising groups to launch operations, both within and outside of Syria, without legally recognized non-profit statuses. As such, these organizations do not have to (nor do they) reveal much about themselves: who is running them, how much money they have raised, records of how those funds have been allocated, etc. A March 2018 analysis by Rodger Shanahan of the Australia-based Lowy Institute explains one angle of this problem:

In some cases, jihadists have used social media to create profiles of themselves as humanitarian workers. Carefully curated images of individuals working with 'orphans and widows' are almost impossible for media organisations or researchers to verify. Intelligence agencies, which may have a more complete picture of an individual's activities, are not always able to dispute the portrayal of foreign fighters as humanitarian workers because of their need to protect sources. Without sufficient evidence that can be used in court, these humanitarian narratives often remain largely unchallenged.<sup>19</sup>

Without the accountability-purposed mechanisms seen with registered charities, there is little to stop these social media-based fundraising entities from diverting funds toward even more nefarious activities than advertised to their supporters, should they choose to.

These charities raise funds solely by the trust of the communities they inhabit, providing little verification beyond photos of donation recipients and unverified written anecdotes. Supporters find these charities via promotional mentions in ideologically and factionally aligned online venues. Such promotions are implicit assurances to these supporters that the charity being promoted does not support or belong to enemy factions, much the same as opposing political parties would not promote fundraisers in support of their opponents.

To receive funds, these Internet age charities use vast ranges of financial technologies, from money transfer services to cryptocurrencies, which are decentralized forms of digital currency that largely exist independently of government authority. Cryptocurrencies can be used to make purchases on the Internet and be converted to/from traditional fiat currencies via online exchanges. Terrorist groups have found creative ways to use cryptocurrencies to receive funds, as seen in the case of Zoobia Shahnaz, a 27-year-old woman from New York who used fraudulently obtained credit cards to purchase Bitcoin, a major cryptocurrency, and then transfer that currency to U.S. dollars, which were then wired to ISIS fronts overseas.<sup>20</sup>

With these communication and fundraising technologies available to anyone with an Internet-connected laptop or smartphone, virtually anyone—from a jihadist in Syria to a 13-year-old in their parents' basement—can launch such a venture. Should these charities be blacklisted by social media platforms or disowned by a community of supporters, the very same individuals running them can simply reemerge under different names and brands.

<sup>20</sup> https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-york-woman-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis

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<sup>19</sup> https://publications.lowyinstitute.org/archive/charities-and-terrorism-lessons-from-the-syrian-crisis/?utm\_source=Lowy&utm\_medium=Redirect&utm\_campaign=Charities%20and%20Terrorism

Syria-based terrorist fundraising groups often tailor their outreach to prospective donors in the West; in some cases, the individuals behind the charities out of Syria are Western *muhajirun* (migrants) themselves, soliciting funds online in their native languages and promoting accounts of migrant fighters.

An-Nasr | The Help

If you see the absence of fear in someone during frightening times then know they are not fe...

This channel belongs to an english speaking Muhājir Brother in Idlib. Follow him in shā'

Allāh

edited 121 • 02:31 PM

An-Nasr, a German and English-writing charity run out of Syria, promoting the Telegram channel of a foreign fighter in Syria's Idlib governorate (September 9, 2021).<sup>21</sup>

Western-reaching jihadi charities vary in terms of how explicitly they aid jihadist militants. Some have openly detailed the weapons they helped finance for frontline fighters. Others, like the longer-standing charities discussed previously, blend such militant-natured projects within their larger portfolios of humanitarian work. Aware what unwanted scrutiny their engagement with Western donors may bring, these groups attempt to veil their militant-natured fundraising operations in innuendo and in-group jargon, using more vague words like "brother" and "equipment" in place of more attention-garnering words like "fighter" or "weaponry."

#### 2.3 Case Study: Al-Ikhwa

A useful case study in this new landscape of terrorist funding is Al-Ikhwa, a so-called charity run out of Syria. The group, formed in or around June of 2018, is particularly representative of fundraising entities claiming to be "independent" while being demonstrably linked to specific factions, as shown in legal documents.

Al-Ikwah has fundraised via many of the same Internet-age technologies as other jihadist-linked "charities" in Syria. These have included money transfer services as well as Bitcoin. The group has also posted images of the individuals it has given funds to, which in June of 2018 alone spanned injured fighters, families, and "the wife of shehid [martyr]."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> An-Nasr, "This channel belongs to an english speaking Muhājir Brother in Idlib...," Telegram, September 9, 2021 https://t.me/helpshaam/157



Images posted by Al-Ikhwa on June 11 (left) and June 26 (right) of 2018

Regarding allegiances, Al-Ikhwa emphasized upon its founding that it was not loyal to any one particular faction. One of the first posts made to the group's channel—and set in the channel's profile section—declared that it was an "independent" organization aimed to help fighters and their families with no further agenda:

#### Disclaimer

Independent charity supporting the brothers in Syria, Wives of Shuhada and their families. We are not linked with any particular fighting group and we do not support any acts of terrorism. We help those who defend the muslims in Sham [Syria]



Post made to Al-Ikhwa Telegram channel (June 6, 2021)

However, in October of 2020, the U.S. government announced legal action against Al-Ikhwa and several similar fundraising operations run out of Syria. A civil complaint details that while Al-Ikhwa claimed independence, "blockchain analysis and a review of related social media posting

demonstrates otherwise."<sup>22</sup> The document details how Al-Ikhwa shared 11 Bitcoin addresses, through which the group was able to receive approximately 0.43820188 Bitcoin "via 18 transactions for the period October 15, 2018 to September 3, 2019." (In this 11-month timespan, Bitcoin's price fluctuated roughly from as low as \$3,100 to high as \$11,800; based on a median price of \$7,450, the aforementioned 0.43820188 Bitcoin would equate to approximately \$3,200.)

A portion of these donations were further sent through an array of other addresses—a cryptocurrency laundering technique known as "layering"—which legal documents described to be Al-Ikhwa attempting to "obfuscate the source of BTC and conceal the identity of the owner."<sup>23</sup> As the administrator of Al Ikhwa stated on Telegram:

...bitcoin makes a new one [i.e. address] every transaction so it's good, it always looks like it's going to a different place..if you ever get [a] police visit and they want to trap you to say you sent [donations] to Syria.. say they are liars..because one person told me maybe they can't track the bitcoin but they can see IP address...But our Syria IP addresses are Turkish because our Internet comes from Turkey. So if they try to trap someone and say you sent money here by showing IP address, you say they are liars and you did business in Turkey.. cause the IP address is Turkish.<sup>24</sup>

The same U.S. Government investigation has placed Al-Ikhwa in the same digital money laundering networks as Malhama Tactical, a Syria-based training group run by Eastern Europeans with close ties to HTS. Malhama Tactical emerged as a military training group for the "Red Bands," HTS' elite forces wing. Malhama Tactical has publicly shown this training on multiple occasions. <sup>25</sup>

On at least one occasion, a collection of Bitcoin addresses promoted by Malhama Tactical's now-deceased founder "Abu Salman Belarus" sent approximately 0.03839 Bitcoin to another collection of Bitcoin addresses which Al-Ikhwa has also used in its cryptocurrency layering activities. This mutual collection of Bitcoin addresses was described in the aforementioned court documents as being purposed to "collect funds and then redistribute the funds." <sup>26</sup>

That fact that Al-Ikhwa has used the same cryptocurrency laundering network as the founder of Malhama Tactical, the group that trains HTS' elite fighters, calls into question the claim of being "independent." While it is unclear how much coordination or association would be required for these financial overlaps to take place—or exactly how many parties contribute to this network—it can be concluded that financially speaking, both groups exist very closely in each other's orbits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1304296/download

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid.

 $<sup>^{25}\</sup> https://ent.site intel group.com/Chatter/syria-based-elite-forces-group-releases-training-video-of-hts-red-bands.html$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1304296/download

# 3. Merciful Hands

Merciful Hands is a charity group run out of the Idlib province of northern Syria. The charity raises funds for the displaced, widows, and orphans, as well as opposition fighters and their families.

SITE Intelligence Group has monitored Merciful Hands since March 2018, which appears to be the time it began its online outreach (this outreach continues to date). In this time, the charity has used such platforms as Telegram and WhatsApp to solicit and coordinate its fundraising activities in English, Arabic, Turkish, and German. The organization has advertised Western Union, PayPal, and Bitcoin (cryptocurrency) as methods of donation.

Around March 22, 2018, Syria-focused Telegram channels began promoting the Merciful Hands Telegram channel and an invite link leading to it.<sup>27</sup> This Merciful Hands channel, which SITE preserved and archived, was created on March 20, 2018, and posted on a near-daily basis. Early posts by the channel showed photos of individuals implied to be recipients of the group's aid, attributing the donations to Merciful Hands and partnered charities while holding Syrian and U.S. currency, as well as clothing, food, and other items. Written posts gave stories of Syrians in need in English, Arabic, and German.

Merciful Hands is not registered as a charity, nor does it have a website from which registrant information can be obtained. The group was created via social media and messenger accounts that require no more than an Internet connection for individuals to solicit for funds under the branding of a charity. The Merciful Hands' administrator has given little information publicly about his/herself apart from Telegram handles (which have included @Thefigtree and @mansouralmany) and contact numbers connected to his/her Telegram (+90 537 822 0931) and Whatsapp (+90 539 384 74 11) accounts. The Merciful Hands Telegram channel has likewise provided no verifiable record about how many funds it has raised or how those funds are being specifically allocated.

The following section details Merciful Hands activity in/around 2018.

#### 3.1 Environment of Origin

Apparent in Merciful Hands' online fundraising activities is its caution when referring to the militants it raises funds for. While the group has exhibited little to no reservation when claiming to raise funds for orphans and displaced people, it has often censored its donation appeals for militants. Such messages are frequently scrubbed of language pertaining to or associated with militant jihad, weaponry, or combat. This caution is especially apparent in its English messages,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> https://t.me/dawahreminders/4752

which appear to intentionally redact jihadist-associated terms like "mujahid" (holy warrior; jihadi fighter) and openly acknowledge avoiding "specific words."

Merciful Hands' caution reflects that of other jihadist charities in Syria. Many of the factions in Idlib alone are designated as terrorist entities by the U.S. and other major powers. These groups include Hurras al-Deen, a de facto al-Qaeda branch, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a powerful Islamist group led by former al-Qaeda commander Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Thus, to avoid government investigations or blacklisting from the online platforms they use, jihadist charities at times describe their militant-related fundraising efforts in vague, if not outright veiled terms: not specifying which group a "mujahid" belongs to, not explicitly stating the individual is a fighter, etc.

Inter-factional rivalries also drive this caution. While HTS is in most ways the dominant faction in Idlib, its contentious rivalries with Hurras al-Deen and other factions require jihadi charities to navigate discontent and disagreement between many prospective donors. By 2018, many such donors had come to resent what was then the early stages of *fitnah* (infighting; sedition) between HTS and other factions in Syria. Al-Qaeda Central even commented on the matter in a March 2018 statement, pleading:

Do not spare any effort to make peace between the factions and call upon everybody to refer to the Shariah of Allah and to focus all energies in confronting the [Assad regime] and its allies, for this is your role and your honor and your glory.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, when fundraising within this infighting-stained environment, many charities began claiming that they were "independent" and "not linked with any particular fighting group."<sup>29</sup> Cases have even been observed in which charity campaigns, despite being pushed almost exclusively by HTS-aligned groups, still claimed to be "not affiliated with any entity."<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, whether the charity supported HTS or other factions, many such entities were by this point designated as terrorists.

As such, Merciful Hands has never professed allegiance or overt support for any specific opposition group operating in Syria, nor has it ever specified which militant groups the fighters it solicits for belong to. However, as shown in the following sections, Merciful Hands did establish a public partnership with the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), a charity that openly supported and fundraised for HTS.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/al-qaeda-urges-disputing-factions-in-northern-syria-to-reconcile-not-allow-strife-benefit-regime.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/endorsed-by-pro-aq-hts-groups-jihadi-charity-continues-bitcoin-fundraising.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/social-media-fundraising-campaign-for-fighters-ammunition-in-syria.html

#### 3.2 Merciful Hands Fundraising for Fighters

Merciful Hands often documents its fundraising activities via photo reports of cash and items being distributed to recipients. Fundraising projects described by Merciful Hands in 2018 ranged from toy drives for children, assistance for families and individuals in need (including families of foreign fighters in Syria), and equipment for fighters. At times, the subjects of such Merciful Hands posts were described as "muhajirun," referring in these contexts to fighters, media workers, their families, and other individuals who travel to foreign lands to support jihad.



#### The Merciful Hands



Food, clothes and money distribution.

May Allah ease there affairs. Amin!!

توزيع الطعام والملابس والمال نسال الله ان يسر امور هم اللهم آمين



#### The Merciful Hands

Another story of two muhajirin brothers.

Both brothers used to be Christians and Alhamdulillah Allah guided them to Islam and after that guided them to make hijrah for jihad. Both brothers are married with two kids and one is expecting his third and as their families are kuffar obviously they do not help them at all. Both brothers were in debt with one brother recently selling most of his house stuff to pay off his debts but now they are both broke. So if there's anyone who can help them please contact us and may Allah reward you.

15:36

\_\_\_\_\_

(عربي) Arabic

قصة اخرى عن اخين مهاجرين

هناك اخين كانوا نصارى والحمد شه الله هداهم الى الاسلام ثم الى الهجرة والى الجهاد الاخين متزوجين واحد لديه طفلين والأخر لديه طفلتين وينتظر الثالث ولا يتلقى اي مساعدة من اهليهم لكونهم كفار كفار الله على المساعدة من اهليهم لكونهم الاخين الثين كانوا عليهم دين واحد منهم باع اغلب اغراض بيته ليوفي دينه ولاكن الان لم يبتى عندهم شي فالذي يستطيع ان يساعدهم نرجو التواصل معنا وجزاكم الله خيرا

Left: Telegram post of family receiving donations (March 27, 2018)<sup>31</sup>; Right: Telegram post requesting donations for two migrant fighters in Syria (March 26, 2018)<sup>32</sup>

When it comes to fundraising for fighters, Merciful Hands has predictably referred to these recipients with caution, often veiling the nature of such donations in religious terminology or innuendo. For example, on March 23, 2018, Merciful Hands issued a fundraising appeal in English and Arabic for "a brother" who was "new to the field" and needed to "purchase equipment" to use on "the fronts." While the post appeared tactfully worded not to explicitly state what type of "equipment" or "fronts" it was referring to, it strongly implied a militant nature to the individual's activities. Even more significantly, the message stated outright that its author is intentionally avoiding certain language, stating, "i have written this without using the specific words but you know what i mean;)." The post read in part:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Merciful Hands, "Food, clothes and money distribution...," Telegram, March 27, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Merciful Hands, "Another story of two muhajirin brothers...," Telegram, March 26, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ

There is a brother who is new to the field and has no money to purchase equitment example vast something for protection when going to the fronts.

So the brother is looking for donations. i have written this without using the specific words but you know what i mean;) so in sha Allah if there is anyone available to help please contact us so we can help get this brother to the field.

one who finances somone in the field is like the one who is in the field himself. Dont worry about donations small or big everything counts and your reward is with Allah in sha Allah

jazakallah khair.<sup>33</sup>



#### The Merciful Hands

12:47

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

There is a brother who is new to the field and has no money to purchase equitment example vast something for protection when going to the fronts.

So the brother is looking for donations. i have written this without using the specific words but you know what i mean;) so in sha Allah if there is anyone available to help please contact us so we can help get this brother to the field.

one who finances somone in the field is like the one who is in the field himself. Dont worry about donations small or big everything counts and your reward is with Allah in sha Allah jazakallah khair.

Post to Merciful Hands Telegram channel (March 23, 2018)

The Arabic section of the message directed prospective donors to the author's WhatsApp number (+90 537 822 0931), which the channel had repeatedly shared as being that of the Merciful Hands.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Merciful Hands, "There is a brother who is new to the field...," Telegram, March 23, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ

Further implying the militant purposes of the donation request, Merciful Hands' abovementioned post told prospective donors that financing "someone in the field" is akin to being "the one who is in the field himself." The wording of this statement is consistent with the concept of making "jihad with one's wealth,"<sup>34</sup> which jihadi fundraisers often appeal to when promising donors equal *ajr* (spiritual reward) as the fighters they finance. <sup>35</sup> As a November 2018 nasheed (Islamic chant) from AAF, a partner of Merciful Hands, proclaimed:

...go forward our honourable brothers, get ready to free yourself of all burdens of life jihad is eternal, get ready with your wealth and your blood our aim is one mission and Allah is above all<sup>36</sup>

Merciful Hands once more appealed to this financial jihad concept on April 6, 2018, while requesting donations for the same fighter so he could purchase "gear" to go to "ribaat" (garrison; front lines). This second appeal, issued in English, German, and Turkish, asserted that "equipping a brother in the cause of Allah is like fighting yourself." The post also used more direct language in specifying that the donations would enable the individual "to go battlefield [sic]," reading in part:

#### Urgernt 2nd appeal

A brother recently married decided its time to ribaat [to go garrison; to go the front lines] snd they told him if he does not have his own gear he is not allowed to come.

so this is a plea to help this brother with then equipment he needs so he can teturn He was once in a jammat [group] they provided everything. Now the brother wants ro return to rhe field but the jammat said there is no extra you must come equipped so the brother cried yesterday cause all he has nothing to go battlefield with what they told him broke his heart.

Merciful Hands fundraising messages appear especially cautious when posting in English, even when translations of those messages use more directly militant jihadist language. For example, a May 20, 2018, Telegram post issued in English, Turkish, and German solicited funds to feed a foreign fighter's family during the month of Ramadan. In English, the fundraiser described the man as a "frontliner," but a German version of the message (provided in the same post) used the word "mujahid" (holy warrior). The message reads in part between English and German:

[English]

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/agap-releases-fourth-issue-of-inspire.html

<sup>35</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/campaign-for-bitcoin-donations-to-fund-fighters-in-syria.html <sup>36</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/indonesian-charity-posts-chant-inciting-jihad-withyour-wealth-and-your-blood.html

...The father is a frontliner, and due his circumstances and debts its hard to keep food on the table.<sup>37</sup>

#### The Merciful Hands

The father is a frontliner, and due his circumstances and debts its hard to keep food on the table.

To the point he has to sell his belongings.

#### [German]

...Der Vater der Familie ist ein Mujahid und aufgrund der Umstände und der Schulden die er hat, fällt es ihm schwer Essen für seine Familie zu besorgen.<sup>38</sup>

#### The Merciful Hands

Der Vater der Familie ist ein Mujahid und aufgrund der Umstände und der Schulden die er hat, fällt es ihm schwer Essen für seine Familie zu besorgen.

The words used in these Merciful Hands posts—"frontliner," "ribaat," "mujahid," etc.—are clear codes intended to let prospective donors know that the group is aiding militants in Syria. The author's openly stated admission that he/she/they are intentionally omitting or changing certain words ("i have written this without using the specific words but you know what i mean") provides yet more confirmation of these donations' militant nature.

# 3.3 Merciful Hands Connections to the Abu Ahmed Foundation and HTS

While Merciful Hands has never espoused working with or fundraising on behalf of HTS (likely due to the group's status as a designated terrorist entity) it has worked with Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), a charity openly supportive of HTS, throughout 2018. In a post made on April 6, 2018, Merciful Hands announced that it, while "bringing aid to the brothers on the fronts," would be "working in conjunction" with AAF while providing an AAF Telegram handle:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Merciful Hands, "There is a family who came from a foreign land and is down to there last amount of money...," Telegram, May 20, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ <sup>38</sup> Ibid.

The Merciful Hands, our charity which is bringing aid to the brothers on the fronts and now we are working in conjunction with The Abu Ahmad Foundation to bring aid to people of syria.<sup>39</sup>



#### The Merciful Hands

15:57

The Merciful Hands, our charity which is bringing aid to the brothers on the fronts and now we are working in conjunction with The Abu Ahmad Foundation to bring aid to people of syria.

May Allah keep us firm and aid us amim

@aafmediacentre

A follow-up post by Merciful Hands, posted on the same day as the aforementioned announcement, showed the results of these two groups' direct collaboration. The photo showed a man in a military-style camouflage jacket holding money in front of a box displaying both groups' logos. An accompanying message reads, "Our new logo, The merciful hands and the Abu Ahmad Foundation. Alhamdiallah another family we were able to help today." 40



Our new logo, The merciful hands and the Abu Ahmad Foundation

Alhamdiallah another family we were able to help today

Photo posted by Merciful Hands, showing its logo alongside AAF's on a donation box, posted April 6, 2018 (image edited to show close-up of Merciful Hands and AAF logos)

Subsequent photos (new and reposted) issued to the Merciful Hands Telegram channel between March 29 and April 28, 2018, displayed the two charities' logos side-by-side on donations distributed in Syria.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Merciful Hands, "The Merciful Hands, our charity which is bringing aid to the brothers on the fronts...," Telegram, April 6, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Merciful Hands, "Our new logo, The merciful hands and the Abu Ahmad Foundation...," Telegram, April 6, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ







coordination with the Abu Ahmad foundation and your support we can help these families iazakallah khaji

Left: Individual holding two U.S. 50 dollar bills and Merciful Hands-AAF graphic (April 5, 2018)<sup>41</sup>; Right: Woman holding a child and Merciful Hands-AAF graphic (April 16, 2018)<sup>42</sup>

The Abu Ahmed Foundation likewise posted about its relationship with Merciful Hands from April 4 to May 4, 2018. For example, a photo posted by AAF to Telegram on April 4, 2018, shows an individual holding what is implied to be a cash donation beside a piece of paper bearing AAF and Merciful Hands' logos side by side. A photo posted immediately after shows an individual doing the same behind a box with the same logos. A corresponding English message states the two charities are "working together":

Abu Ahmad Foundation with Merciful Hands, #AAF contirbuted to the very beautiful merciful hands cause, (may Allah give this organisation more help aamiin) working together we say it louder inshaallah [God willing], working together for Allahs pleasure inshaallah, jazakallah khairan [May God reward you with goodness] to those who received support and took the time to send this message

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Merciful Hands, "Merciful hands, Abu Ahmad Foundation. and your support jazakallah khair...," Telegram, April 5, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ <sup>42</sup> Merciful Hands, "In coordination with the Abu Ahmad foundation and your support we can help these

families...," Telegram, April 16, 2018, https://t.me/joinchat/AAAAAFNenUfuuVbj9Y2lrQ



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE





AAF MEDIA CENTRE



Posts made to the AAF Telegram channel (April 4, 2018)

Merciful Hands' collaboration with AAF is significant given the charity's origin and overt financial and ideological support of designated terrorist organizations operating in Syria, in particular HTS. The following section provides more information about AAF's activities and links to HTS.

## 4. Abu Ahmed Foundation

The Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF) fundraises mainly for jihadi fighters in Syria. The group has openly prioritized such fundraising over purely "humanitarian" objectives, steering away prospective donors seeking the latter.

AAF is understood to be run primarily by Indonesian jihadi migrants out of Syria's Idlib Province. While AAF focuses most of its content and activity on Syria, wherefrom its operation is run, the group has maintained a base of donors and supporters in Indonesia.

As far as factional partisanship goes, AAF's fundraising efforts are almost entirely devoted to HTS. In 2018 alone, such activity by AAF included dissemination of HTS propaganda, messages attempting to quell disputes between HTS and other factions. This activity also included strongly implied allegiance to HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, whom AAF posted pictures of and referred to as "our shaikh [leader]," and a clearly stated position that the group "Stand[s] with #HTS." Notably, this financial and rhetorical support has extended directly to Malhama Tactical, an Idlib-based jihadi military group which trains HTS' elite forces. Malhama Tactical, which until recently was run by a Chechen jihadi fighter in Syria, <sup>43</sup> is not officially a part of HTS, though its connection to the group has been widely documented—including by Malhama Tactical itself. <sup>44</sup>

AAF's links to HTS were especially significant in late 2018 as Turkey joined other countries in designating HTS as a terrorist entity. <sup>45</sup> During this time, AAF condemned these designations while functioning similarly to an unofficial financing and media arm for HTS: translating its official Arabic claims to English and Indonesian, defending HTS against its detractors, and posting in accordance with HTS' media campaigns.

AAF also situates itself within the global jihadist movement via its support for Hurras al-Deen, an al-Qaeda-linked faction in Syria; quoting al-Qaeda leaders; and stated enmity against the U.S.

The following section details AAF activity in/around 2018.

#### 4.1 Background

AAF was founded by Tazneen Miriam Sailar, a British national who converted to Islam following her marriage to an Indonesian fighter Abu Ahmad al-Indunisy (AKA Acep Ahmad

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/leader-of-hts-linked-elite-forces-group-issues-statement-announcing-resignation.html

<sup>44</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/syria-based-elite-forces-group-releases-training-video-of-hts-red-bands.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKCN1LG1XM

Setiawan).<sup>46</sup> Abu Ahmad, whom Sailar named the foundation after, held ties to al-Qaeda both in Indonesia and after he migrated to Syria.

Abu Ahmad was a member of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian terrorist group behind several high-profile attacks in the country. The group was designated by the U.S.<sup>47</sup> following its 2002 bombings in Bali, which killed over 200 people. The bombings are believed to have been funded by al-Qaeda.<sup>48</sup> Several JI-linked individuals have also been designated by the U.S.<sup>49</sup>

Sailar and Abu Ahmad were embedded with some of al-Qaeda's most prominent leadership in Indonesia. According to media reports on Sailar, her 2010 marriage was officiated by Abu Bakar Bashir,<sup>50</sup> an Indonesian cleric who is the spiritual head of JI. Abu Ahmed was killed in 2015 fighting for al-Qaeda's former branch in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (which would later become Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham).

#### 4.2 AAF's Online Fundraising

In soliciting donations, AAF has explicitly and repeatedly specified that funds were intended for such recipients as fighters on "ribath" (garrisoned; on the front lines). For instance, a July 17, 2018 post from the group explained that the group has vowed to "focus to the active mujahedeen on ribath [Harrison]" and stated that those seeking to donate to a "more humanitarian"-minded charity can look to other organizations. The post read in part:

AAF from day one made a firm vow inshaaAllah that we would focus to the active mujahedeen on ribath, this is because the donations that come in are from people wanting to do jihad but for many reasons can't do that yet, most who give are in poverty conditions themselves, sisters sell their things, ikhwan give part of their small salery, even mujahideen in prison send maa shaaAllah... Amanah, we have made the promise that AAF focuses to active mujahideen not just those who hijra...And if it corresponds with our obligation then we 'within two days' usually inshaaAllah get the aid to where it was designated, if the donator wishes for a more humanitarian (like refugee camps etc) we give them contacts with those NGOs we trust and let them distribute...<sup>51</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> https://www.mei.edu/publications/pro-al-qaeda-indonesian-connection-hts-syria-security-implications

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm

<sup>48</sup> https://www.smh.com.au/national/al-qaeda-financed-bali-claims-hambali-report-20031006-gdhjab.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js700.aspx

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/2/indonesia-detains-british-woman-on-terror-suspect-list

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "AAF from day one made a firm vow," Telegram, July 7, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



MEDIA CENTRE 22:03

Bismillah, I've been asked to give an explanation of why AAF only gives (looks for aid) for those on active ribath... Firstly we priase Allah for the efforts of all the organisations that are doing their best to help people in Sham may Allah reward them all, and we love them all because of Allah..... AAF from day one made a firm vow inshaaAllah that we would focus to the active mujahedeen on ribath, this is because the donations that come in are from people wanting to do jihad but for many reasons can't do that yet, most who give are in poverty conditions themselves, sisters sell their things, ikhwan give part of their small salery, even mujahideen in prison send maa shaaAllah... So as you can imagine this is a huge weight on AAF shoulders.. Amanah, we have made the promise that AAF focuses to active mujahideen not just those who hijra (may Allah ease them also) after years now we see, ribath in the way of Allah increases the rizki from Allah and Allah will sustain them and their family's, Allah made it a fard obligation to provide for them before all others, and as ibnu Tamiyah explained even if that means someone died of hunger, would still be obligatory to provide for active mujahideen first, and of we don't then surly Allah will punish us.... Allahu alam, AAF takes it's instructions from the donator, we always ask? What do you wish us to do with this? And if it corresponds with our obligation then we 'within two days' usually inshaaAllah get the aid to where it was designated, if the donator wishes for a more humanitarian (like refugee camps etc) we give them contacts with those NGOs we trust and let them distribute... Honesty is a priority, and the donators right to have a say, he wishes for the reward of jihad.... So his donations must be distributed correctly or AAF will answer to Allah as to why not... This is our policy, hijra without jihad and in difficulties we ask Allah to make ease, but we suggest joining with those who fight to speed up the ease inshaaAllah, jazakallah kahairan, assalamualaikum Aisvah

Post made to AAF Telegram channel regarding its focus on fighters (July 17, 2021)

AAF restated this point just under two weeks later on July 30, 2018, declaring in part, "...right now priority is getting our brothers equipt for the pending battles...AAF is just a bridge to get that obligation out there streight into the hands of our mujahidin."<sup>52</sup>

Months later, on September 17, 2018, AAF once more distanced itself from humanitarian charity work. The group's post described providing packets of food to fighters' families as an exception to its focus on funding fighters, which was "not the same as finding money for humanitarian issues":

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "right now priority is getting our brothers equipt...," Telegram, July 30, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

Who does Allah love the most? Maa shaaAllah, let me tell you about something, AAF had a request from the istishadi [martyrdom-seeking] team idlib ,they asked for nothing for themselves only 20 packets of food for their familys, AAF are focused to collection of infaq [spending] for ribath [garrison] and the familys of mujahid (and i will be honest) ya not the same as finding money for humanitarian issues, 'people fear the stigma of funding terorisme' Na'udzubillah [we seek refuge with God], little or big inshaaallah [God willing] AAF istiqomah [steadfastness], but after this request from the seekers of paradise i was humbled, the amount they needed came within not more than eight minutes, and we prostrated to Allah the merciful the Beneficent, how Allah loves the seekers of paradise and answered their request immediately Alhamdulillah allahu akbar, inshaaallah we will update when the amanah [fulfillment of duty; trust] is in the hands of those special familys aamiin, jazakallah khairan, assalamualaikum [may God reward you with goodness, peace be upon you]<sup>53</sup>



#### **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

02:35

Post to AAF's Telegram channel, clarifying that its work of funding fighters is "not the same as finding money for humanitarian issues" (September 17, 2021)

Within this focus on frontline fighters, AAF has at times branded its fundraising campaigns under its "Ribath Project," which it characterized as "forgotten obligation for those who can not do iihad right now."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Who does Allah love the most?" Telegram, September 24, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Various ribath programs coming from AAF," Telegram, July 9, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



Left: From video of AAF giving out equipment to fighters as part of its Ribath Project (March 25, 2018); Right: Garrisoned fighter shown as part of AAF's Ribath Project (June 6, 2018)

Several fundraising posts by AAF have included not only a WhatsApp contact number, but also what was stated to be a bank account number:

BNI syariah a/n : AAF No. Rek. 0695-060-592

jazakallah khair [May Allah reward you]...

confirmasi [contact]: WA: 082236845656

#### 4.3 Association with HTS

Fitting to its founder's ties to JI and al-Qaeda, AAF established open connections with HTS in Syria. AAF's fundraising messages for fighters and families in Syria across 2018 were also accompanied by messages of support for HTS. AAF expressed this support at least as early as March 29, 2018, when posting an invite link to a Telegram chat group along with the hashtag "#HTS\_HOPE\_OF\_UMMAH" ("Ummah" meaning "nation," referring to Muslims collectively). 55



AAF has never hidden its affiliation with HTS and has even gone so far as to announce a "charity cooperation" between AAF and HTS purposed to recruit new fighters. Before providing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "#HTS\_HOPE\_OF\_UMMAH," Telegram, March 29, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

the above-mentioned bank number and WhatsApp contact information, the July 17, 2018 message stated in part:

# Bismillah [in the name of Allah],,, A charity cooperation offered to AAF team of Syria/Indonesia, from maktab dawah [outreach office] HTS idlib.

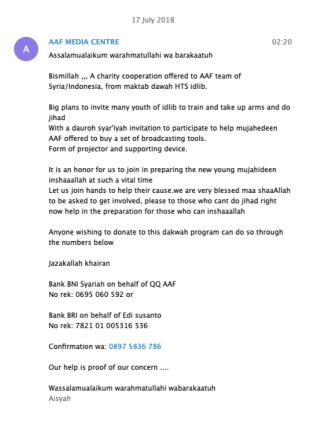
Big plans to invite many youth of idlib to train and take up arms and do jihad With a dauroh syar'iyah invitation to participate to help mujahedeen AAF offered to buy a set of broadcasting tools.

Form of projector and supporting device.

It is an honor for us to join in preparing the new young mujahideen inshaaallah at such a vital time

Let us join hands to help their cause we are very blessed maa shaaAllah to be asked to get involved, please to those who cant do jihad right now help in the preparation for those who can inshaaallah

Anyone wishing to donate to this dakwah program can do so through the numbers below...<sup>56</sup>

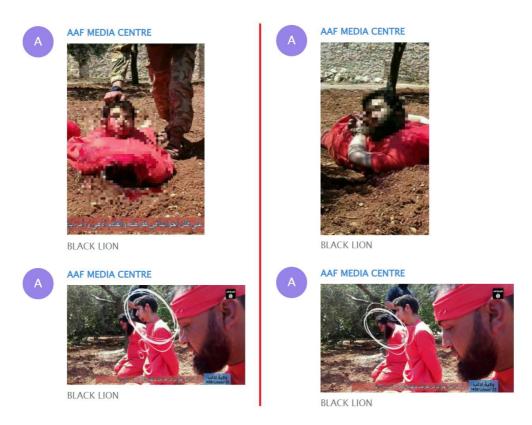


<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "A charity cooperation offered to AAF team of Syria/Indonesia, from maktab dawah HTS idlib.," Telegram, July 17, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

26

AAF often framed its support for HTS within the context of the latter's disputes with groups like ISIS. Such disputes have been major focus points in jihadi factions' outreach, which use attacks from other groups to add urgency to their recruitment and fundraising agendas. In the summer of 2018 in particular, HTS and ISIS had launched high-profile campaigns against each other, which entailed each group publishing condemnations and attack claims against the other.<sup>57</sup> Appearing to participate in the campaign, AAF made several postings pertaining to an ISIS photo report showing the executions of several HTS militants. On June 30, 2018, AAF posted photos of aid sent to one of these individuals' family along with an Indonesian language message reporting that AAF gave them \$50 in cash and food.<sup>58</sup>

Appearing to capitalize on ISIS' beheadings by evoking emotional responses from potential donors, two of AAF's related posts included images of the individuals beheaded, only mildly censored. Both postings were accompanied by stories of the two individuals—identified as "Khottob al Homsy" and "Umar"—describing their steadfastness and dedication to the conflict in Syria.



 $<sup>^{57}\</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/is-attacks-hts-in-campaign-named-after-is-fighter-beheaded-by-group-in-idlib.html?auid=11025$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "team aaf& mbp telah menyampaikan amanah kepada al akh muhammad umar." Telegram, June 30, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

Left: HTS fighter identified by AAF as "Umar," as shown in ISIS photo report (June 24, 2018)<sup>59</sup> Right: HTS fighter identified by AAF as ""Khottob al Homsy" as shown in ISIS photo report (June 24, 2018)<sup>60</sup>

AAF's campaigning for HTS throughout 2018 was seen in multiple contexts, including that of HTS' strife with other factions in Idlib. On August 4, 2018, AAF posted a lengthy English-language statement in which it declared emphatically, "We Stand with #HTS." The post framed HTS as a diverse and righteous group that only fights fellow Muslims as a "last choice," declaring that HTS' "doors are always open to those who wish to leave treacherous ways and come back to the truth":

#### We Stand With #HTS

More than just a jama'ah [group], but an amalgumation of backgrounds, tribes, to clean the ashobiyah from the heart... More than just jihad with the rifle but a sistem thats goal is jihad wal dakwa... HTS never wash their hands of any muslim, retaliation is always the last choice when facing even the worst traitors on the battle field, arms are always open wide even to those who have betrayed because inviting a Muslim brother back to the path of Allah is sunnah (not a weakness) even if HTS are betrayed time and time again? YOU see this as (not learning from past mistakes?) When the reality is THIS is sunnah... And HTS much prefer to suffer losses than make jihad exclusive, HTS doors are always open to those who wish to leave treacherous ways and come back to the truth. More than just a jamaah, but more than 20k strong men saying victory belongs to Islam and our name will be forgotton, we will all be dust... A sistem that we are those who take the middle path, not ghuluw like some, and worst still not traitors to our relegion and are dedicated to jihad and dakwa and inviting to the truth... HTS do not loose sleep over the fitnaa [infighting] war, and Allah has granted them peace in the heart because they choose not to spend time fighting a media war.... HTS is a system where even an Amir must have a ruling by the syuro before undertaking an action against his enemy or the traitors... And the HTS is syuro of veterans from many wars...and experts in their field.

That's why #Indonesia #WeStandWithHTS.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Sepenggal kisah dari akhuna umar." Telegram, June 24, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Sosok pribadi akh khottob al homsy di mata teman mujahidin." Telegram, June 24, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "We Stand With #HTS." Telegram, August 4, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



#### **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

21:29

We Stand With #HTS

More than just a jama'ah, but an amalgumation of backgrounds, tribes, to clean the ashobiyah from the heart... More than just jihad with the rifle but a sistem thats goal is jihad wal dakwa... HTS never wash their hands of any muslim, retaliation is always the last choice when facing even the worst traitors on the battle field, arms are always open wide even to those who have betrayed because inviting a Muslim brother back to the path of Allah is sunnah (not a weakness) even if HTS are betrayed time and time again? YOU see this as (not learning from past mistakes?) When the reality is THIS is sunnah... And HTS much prefer to suffer losses than make jihad exclusive, HTS doors are always open to those who wish to leave treacherous ways and come back to the truth. More than just a jamaah, but more than 20k strong men saying victory belongs to Islam and our name will be forgotton, we will all be dust... A sistem that we are those who take the middle path, not ghuluw like some, and worst still not traitors to our relegion and are dedicated to jihad and dakwa and inviting to the truth... HTS do not loose sleep over the fitnaa war, and Allah has granted them peace in the heart because they choose not to spend time fighting a media war.... HTS is a system where even an Amir must have a ruling by the syuro before undertaking an action against his enemy or the traitors... And the HTS is syuro of veterans from many wars...and experts in their field.

That's why #Indonesia #WeStandWithHTS. Aisyah

Post by AAF expressing support for HTS (August 4, 2018)

AAF's embrace of HTS even included promoting the group's executions. 13 days later, on August 17, 2018, AAF also posted an official HTS photo report showing the execution of six ISIS militants in Idlib. AAF translated the Arabic captions to English, writing: "The implementation of Qisos [equal retaliation] for6 elements of the gangs of Baghdadi proved in sheria court to be involved in planting bombs and killing Muslims and their children." 62

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "The implementation of Qisos." Telegram, August 17 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



Aisyah



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE



04:36



Aisyah



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

04:37

The implementation of Qisos for6 elements of the gangs of Baghdadi proved in sheria court to be involved in planting bombs and killing Muslims and their children Aisyah

Three posts by AAF regarding HTS' execution of six ISIS militants (August 17, 2018)

AAF continued to flood its channel with official HTS content, from communiques and photo reports to religious edicts. One HTS communique posted to AAF's channel on July 6, 2018, told people in the Daraa area to evacuate because HTS was declaring it to be a military zone.



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE



Aisyah

AAF shares HTS' Ebaa News Agency news report (July 6, 2018)

AAF also posted numerous images of HTS leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, as featured in HTS propaganda. Posting such images on August 21, 2018, the group notably referred to Julani as "our shaikh," implying some degree of allegiance to him. The post read: "Our shaikh [leader] busy as usual on eidul adha [an Islamic holiday], may Allah protect him Aamiin allahumma aamiin [meaning, *O Allah, hear this truth*]."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Our shaikh busy as usual on eidul adha, may Allah protect him Aamiin allahumma aamiin." Telegram, August 21, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

08:39



Our shaikh busy as usual on eidul adha, may Allah protect him Aamiin allahumma aamiin Aisyah



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

09:52



Aisyah

AAF posts of HTS propaganda featuring its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, whom AAF identifies as "our shaikh" (August 21, 2018)

The same day, the group posted an image of Julani from a video speech released that day. In the speech, Julani warned Syrian factions from trusting Turkish government. AAF's posting of the screenshot appeared to echo this warning, reading:

WE SHOULD NOT BELIEVE IN THE TURKEY GOVERNMENT, their promises and media statements, they are all political "fictions" <sup>64</sup>

<sup>-</sup>

 $<sup>^{64}</sup>$  AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "KITA TIDAK BOLEH PERCAYA PADA PEMERINTAH TURKI." Telegram, August 21, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



23:05



KITA TIDAK BOLEH PERCAYA PADA PEMERINTAH TURKI, janji-janji mereka dan pernyataan media, mereka semua adalah "khayalan" politik Aisyah

AAF post echoing message from August 2018 speech by Abu Muhammad al-Julani (August 21, 2018)

At times, AAF's work resembled that of an unofficial media group for HTS. Posts not only shared official HTS content, but also translated it, as seen in the following August 17, 2018 posting of an HTS statement titled, "A Preacher in Tahrir al-Sham Responses to the Recent Threats of Lavrov," along with an Indonesian translation of the preacher's message. 65

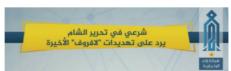
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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "DEWAN SYARI HTS MERESPON ANCAMAN TERBARU LAVROV." Telegram, August 17, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



#### **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

00:40



Aisyah



#### **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

00:40

#### DEWAN SYARI HTS MERESPON ANCAMAN TERBARU LAVROV

Dewan syari HTS telah menetapkan "Abu Abdul Rahman al-Shami," sebuah transkrip dari salurannya melalui Telegram dg menyampaikan sebuah surat kepada Rusia dan Menteri Luar Negerinya Lavrov setelah pernyataannya baru-baru ini tentang niat negerinya untuk menargetkan Mujahidin di daerah-daerah yang telah dibebaskan.

Al-Shami berkata: "Di utara, orang-orang yg berjihad telah berbaiat mati dan berkeinginan untuk syahid fie sabilillah. Kami telah membebani kuda-kuda kami, membawa jiwa kami pada leher kami, dan menggerakkan kami untuk tidak takut bertemu denganMu. Dan hari2 diantara kami wahai penyembah salib.

Dan Syekh Shami menambahkan: "Jika Engkau berprasangka mereka mempercayaimu Bahwa Syam akan menyelesaikan pertempurannya dengan tanganmu, maka Mereka telah memperhitungkan dan gagal serta kecewa, juga hal itu tak akan selesai dengan hanya memerangi dan membalasmu, kecuali atas takdir Allah Yang Maha Kuasa."

Shami menutup pesannya bahwa Mujahidin telah menyiapkan pertempuran "dan mereka telah bersumpah untuk tak membiarkanmu memasuki wilayahnya dan akan memaksamu keluar serta menjadikanmu kecewa dengan kekuatan Allah, tak akan bermanfaat bagimu mengharapkan pengkhianatan dari putera2 kami.

Aisvah

AAF posts an Indonesian translation of an official HTS statement (August 17, 2018)

AAF also continued providing English translations of HTS content. On August 19, 2018, AAF posted four photos from an Arabic-captioned HTS photo report, accompanying them with an English translation:

New arrests

A number of the leaders of treason who tried "reconciliation" with the Nusseiri attested by HTS security units,# Maara \_Musrine North Idleb<sup>66</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "New arrests." Telegram, August 19, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

04:23



Aisyah



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE





Aisyah



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

04.24

New arrests

A number of the leaders of treason who tried "reconciliation" with the Nusseiri attested by HTS security units,# Maara \_Musrine North Idleb Aisyah

Translation of HTS photo report, posted by AAF (August 19, 2018)

AAF posts not featuring official HTS content often made the same focus on the group, nonetheless. Other HTS-aligned content posted by AAF included images of adults and children holding up HTS' flag, expressing support for the group while defending it and Julani against charges that they are "terrorists." <sup>67</sup>

Such messages of support included some from Indonesia. On August 19, 2018, AAF posted what it described as religious students in Indonesia waving HTS' flag through the streets "while being observed by police," despite the flag being "banned." 68

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "My uncles r not terrorist says the child." Telegram, September 13, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Allahu akbar, next level defiance." Telegram, August 19, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



### **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

22:44

♦ ♦ © Allahu akbar, next level defiance from Indonesia (madrasah students) to show their support for HTS, local students break law (HTS flag banned) and take to the road in the back of a pick up truck waving HTS flag and takbir Aisyah

A

#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

22:47



While being observed by police (2) (2) (4)

AAF posts video of religious students waving HTS' flag in Indonesia (August 19, 2018)

An AAF post from four days earlier on August 15, 2018, showed a picture of an individual identified as being "from Indonesia" expressing support for Julani and HTS, as stated on a handwritten letter he holds.<sup>69</sup>



### AAF MEDIA CENTRE

23:51



'salam from Indonesia for Syaikh Abu Muhammad Al-jaulani and the HTS mujahidin may Allah bless them all. Aisyah

AAF posting of Indonesian HTS supporter (August 15, 2018)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "'salam from Indonesia..." Telegram, August 15, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

It is critical to note that HTS is the only group AAF shared and translated media for (communiques, photo reports, etc.) and largely the only group it posted on behalf of. With this near-exclusive focus on HTS, AAF functioned in many ways as an unofficial extension of HTS in terms of media work, outreach, and financing. Among the most noteworthy and potentially impactful of these activities was its support for an HTS-linked militant training group called Malhama Tactical.

# 4.4 Links to Malhama Tactical, Training Group for HTS' Elite **Forces**

AAF's support for HTS has also extended to Malhama Tactical, a group that trains HTS' elite forces wing known as "The Red Bands." AAF has signaled this support for Malhama Tactical and, by extension, the Red Bands forces it trains—at least as early as 2018, stating its militants were "ready to fight to the death." A post from August 20, 2018, contained a picture of an HTS militant, whom the post acknowledged as having "the red head band," along with a heart-eyed emoji signaling admiration:

The red head band: these are mujahid Tahreer Sham (HTS) the head band simbolis for the batalion fidais (Ready to fight to the death)



## AAF MEDIA CENTRE



The red head band: these are mujahid Tahreer Sham (HTS) the head band simbolis for the batalion fidais (Ready to fight to the death) Aisyah

02:12

In October of 2018, AAF partnered with Malhama Tactical to fundraise for a training camp for "training mujahid in elite skills" with airsoft guns. <sup>70</sup> An AAF poster for the fundraiser was also posted by Malhama Tactical's Telegram channel, which directed the message toward "brothers from Indonesia."



For brothers from Indonesia

Malhama Tactical.

● 1521 12:38 AM

Post by Malhama Tactical regarding its partnership with AAF

# 4.5 Signals to the Global Jihadist Movement

In addition to fundraising for HTS, the Abu Ahmed Foundation also reportedly fundraised for the group Hurras al-Deen. Based in Syria, Hurras al-Deen is comprised of al-Qaeda veterans and is widely understood to be a de-facto branch of al-Qaeda. On July 9, 2018, the group posted, "Love to Tandzim Hurras al Deen from your AAF family." A video issued by the charity two

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> NEW AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Bismillah, first program i wish to publish today is with our beloved Malhama Tactical brothers," Telegram, October 21, 2018 https://t.me/NEWAAFMEDIACENTRE

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/pro-aq-indonesian-charity-raises-funds-for-syria-based-military-training-group.html

days later on July 9, 2018, featured a fighter thanking the Abu Ahmed Foundation for donations to Hurras al-Deen militants. An individual implied to be a Hurras al-Deen member stated in the video:

A message to our brother in Indonesia: May Allah reward you with goodness for your aid, and seek your reward from Allah. Allah permitting this aid will reach your Mujahideen brothers in the Hurras al-Deen. Your brothers in the Hurras al-Deen thank you and I thank you and offer thanks on their behalf, may Allah reward you with goodness...<sup>72</sup>





Top: Banner branded under AAF's "Ribath Project" shown in video; Bottom: Hurras al-Deen flag held by fighter in thanking donors in Indonesia

Regarding Hurras al-Deen, AAF messages in 2018 appear purposed to quell what was then the beginning of a years-long dispute between the group and HTS while expressing "Love to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, Telegram, July 9, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

Tandzim Hurras al Deen from your AAF family."<sup>73</sup> Commenting on the above video of Hurras al-Deen fighters thanking donors, AAF wrote:

The real akhlak of our hurras brothers, not the pretenders, the munafiq who wish to see splits in the ranks, believers are of one body and love each other with patience, inshaaAllah this evil (the munfiqeen war on social media will have nothing to say soon, Allah will show who speaks truth and who would try to destroy the brotherhood that is mujahideen in the way of Allah (whatever faction) as long as they fight for Allah and HIS law they are bound by the same brotherhood inshaaAllah aamiin<sup>74</sup>



## **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

20:36

## 6666

The real akhlak of our hurras brothers, not the pretenders, the munafiq who wish to see splits in the ranks, believers are of one body and love each other with patience, inshaaAllah this evil (the munfiqeen war on social media will have nothing to say soon, Allah will show who speaks truth and who would try to destroy the brotherhood that is mujahideen in the way of Allah (whatever faction) as long as they fight for Allah and HIS law they are bound by the same brotherhood inshaaAllah aamiin Aisyah

The group has also embraced messaging by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on multiple occasions. For example, an August 15, 2018 message to AAF's Telegram channel posted a quote from Zawahiri, taken from his February 11, 2012 speech in support of the Syrian uprising.<sup>75</sup> Zawahiri's quote read in part that those in Syria:" Do not depend on the West or America, the Arabs, and Turkish regimes and 'you' are more than aware of what they are planning against you."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "The real akhlak of our hurras brothers," Telegram, July 30, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre," Telegram, July 9, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "The real akhlak of our hurras brothers," Telegram, July 30, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

 $<sup>^{75}\</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Latest-Multimedia-from-al-Qaeda-as-Sahab/zawahiri-issues-video-in-support-of-syrian-uprising.html$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Shaykh Ayman Al-Zawahiri (may Allah preserve him)," Telegram, August 15, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



Shaykh Ayman Al-Zawahiri (may Allah preserve him):

"O people in Syria,

Do not depend on the West or America, the Arabs, and Turkish regimes and 'you' are more than aware of what they are planning against you.

Depend on Allah alone, for your sacrifice, resistance and fortitude.

They don't want Syria to be a free Islamic and a strong country, fighting against Israel.

But, they want Syria to be obedient, weak, with no regards of religion, inheritance, history and glory.

They want a Syria that recognizes the form of Israel, which is in accordance with and conquers of international oppression which they call INTERNATIONAL LAW. "

- Quotes from "Come on, O lions of Al-Sham" -Aisyah

AAF post quoting Ayman al-Zawahiri (August 15, 2018)

Likewise, on September 21, 2018, AAF forwarded a message<sup>77</sup> from a pro-al-Qaeda Telegram channel quoting Zawahiri's speech<sup>78</sup> for the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the 9/11 attacks. The forwarded message read:

Shaykh Ayman Zawahiri in a new message on the occasion of 11 September said:

"Eeryone who sows discord in the ranks of the Mujahideen, strives to break their unity and disperse their gathering, and everyone who ignites the fire of internal fighting and strife between the Mujahideen, in reality secures American objectives with his own hands. By doing so, he saves the Americans great efforts, enormous expenses, human and financial losses; irrespective of the claims or doubts raised by the propagators of discord and seekers of power."

<sup>77</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE (forwarded from Al Maqalaat), "Shaykh Ayman Zawahiri in a new message on the occasion of 11 September said..." Telegram, September 21, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre

 $<sup>^{78}\</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/aq-leader-zawahiri-advises-how-to-confront-america-on-17th-anniversary-of-9-11.html$ 



# **AAF MEDIA CENTRE**

13:59



## Al Magalaat 11.09.2018 13:35:06

Shaykh Ayman Zawahiri in a new message on the occasion of 11 September said:

"Eeryone who sows discord in the ranks of the Mujahideen, strives to break their unity and disperse their gathering, and everyone who ignites the fire of internal fighting and strife between the Mujahideen, in reality secures American objectives with his own hands. By doing so, he saves the Americans great efforts, enormous expenses, human and financial losses; irrespective of the claims or doubts raised by the propagators of discord and seekers of power."

Message forwarded by AAF from a pro-al-Qaeda channel called Al Maqalaat (September 21, 2018)

AAF has also issued at least implicit threats of its own against the U.S., using language and tropes specific to that of the global jihadist community. On October 1, 2018, AAF posted a promotional image for what was then a newly released pro-Trump documentary called "Trump @War." In the promotional image, the former President was quoted as saying, "We will united the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, and we will eradicate it completely from the face of the earth." In response, AAF's post stated that jihadists' war had just "started" and used the hashtag "#Coming\_Oh\_Americans":

## Mr.trump

Stop our Martyrdom Operations if you can, we will say you won this War,

If you can't then We won It?

#War\_Is\_just\_started\_now & it will be tell the Qiyamah [Day of Resurrection].

#Coming\_Oh\_Americans 79

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> AAF MEDIA CENTRE, "Mr.trump..." Telegram, October 1, 2018 https://t.me/aafmediacentre



#### AAF MEDIA CENTRE



Mr.trump

Stop our Martyrdom Operations if you can, we will say you won this War,

If you can't then We won It?

#War\_ls\_just\_started\_now & it will be tell the Qiyamah.



The hashtag "#Coming\_Oh\_Americans" is consistent with jihadist threats against countries and alliances, as seen with such social media campaigns by ISIS, hashtags of which have included "#We Are Coming O Rome." 80

At no time over the course of 2018 did AAF ever conceal its connection to jihadist factions, its al-Qaeda-linked background, nor its overwhelming support for HTS. By mid-2018, AAF unambiguously functioned as an unofficial financial and media platform for HTS, which was by then already designated as a terrorist entity. The fact that HTS is the only group that AAF has given this exclusive level of support to speaks yet more to these links. At the same time, AAF had clearly stated in 2018 that it was not a humanitarian-focused organization, making its militant nature all the more apparent.

These items considered, it is significant that an organization like Merciful Hands, which implies itself to be a humanitarian charity, would work with AAF instead of the scores of reputable humanitarian charities in or focused on Syria. It is equally significant that Merciful Hands, which claims to be "independent" of factional partisanship, would work with a group as partisan to HTS as AAF. By both of these angles, AAF's activities speak to the misleading ways Merciful Hands bills itself.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/02/20/the-islamic-state-threatens-to-come-to-rome-italians-respond-with-travel-advice/

# 5. Al-Sadaqa

Al Sadaqah is a Syrian-based charity that specifically solicits funds to support "rebel factions" in northern Syria. Apart from fundraising, Al Sadaqah's stated activities have also included smuggling, with the group offering to facilitate a way to smuggle fighters "from Turkey... to Burma [Myanmar]." The charity operated between 2017 and 2019, in which time it fundraised to purchase food, weapons, and equipment for fighters in addition to "other projects assisting the jihad." The group has communicated to followers in at least as many languages as Arabic, English, French, and Russian.

Al Sadaqah does not advertise a significant preference for one faction in Syria, and its operations have been promoted on HTS and al-Qaeda-aligned channels alike. However, the group has collaborated with the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), an self-styled "charity" in Syria that is dedicated to HTS far above other groups.

The following section details Al Sadaqah activity in/around 2018.

# 5.1 Fundraising from Syria

Compared to other jihadi "charities" run out of Syria, Al Sadaqah's fundraising appeals are relatively detailed as to what donations would reportedly be going toward, and how much money those projects would require. Donations have gone toward an array of equipment and facilities for militants, including weapons, military uniforms, food, solar panels, and batteries.

Al Sadaqa received these funds through a variety of methods, which has included Western Union,<sup>81</sup> Amazon gift cards,<sup>82</sup> and cash deposits.<sup>83</sup> On other occasions the group has solicited donations through and other cryptocurrencies<sup>84</sup> such as Dash, Monero, and Verge, though the most prevalent among these was Bitcoin. Al Sadaqah has offered assistance to donors via designated WhatsApp, Telegram, and SecMail (an anonymous email service) contact information.

Aware of donors' worries of security and legal recourse, Al Sadaqah frequently attested to the perceived safety of Bitcoin donations. Messages assured prospective donors that they could donate "anonymously and securely from anywhere in the world" with cryptocurrencies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/western-union-funds-now-urged-by-western-fighters-in-svria.html

<sup>82</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/amazon-gift-cards-endorsed-by-jihadists-seeking-funds.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/funds-to-western-fighters-in-syria-now-payable-by-cash-deposits.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/syria-based-western-jihadist-charity-calls-for-cryptocurrency-donations-in-addition-to-bitcoin.html

Meanwhile, its propaganda uniformly contained its Bitcoin address, as well as mention of Monero, Dash, and Verge.



Al Sadagah 29.01.2018 07:58:34



13:27

Support the Mujihideen in Syria anoymously and securely from anywhere in the world with crytpocurrency. Contact @alsadaqahsyria

Al Sadaqah post of photo report and assurance that donors can "securely" give via cryptocurrency (January 29, 2018)

Notably, Al Sadaqah videos and photo reports in this time often provided visual confirmation of how donations were aiding fighters. For example, a May 2018 photo report showcased how Al Sadaqah had provided "brand new military suits to mujahideen." The photo report showed the fighters standing with the items, which were labeled with Al Sadaqah branding.<sup>85</sup>



Al Sadaqah photo report showing donations of clothing to fighters (donation information redacted)

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 $<sup>^{85}\</sup> https://ent.site intel group.com/Terrorism-Finance/western-fighters-in-syria-continue-cryptocurrency-fundraising.html$ 

Al Sadaqah's Telegram administrator has also been seen soliciting for fighting equipment on Telegram chat groups. In early 2018, the "Al Sadaqah admin" account posted into a pro-HTS chat group, forwarding details of a sniper scope after stating, "anyone who wants to purchase this for the brothers inbox me. It's a thermal sniper scope."



Post by the administrator of the Al Sadaqah Telegram channel requesting donations for a sniper scope

Donations to Al Sadaqah also contributed to the garrison positions themselves. In the beginning of 2018, Al Sadaqah released a series of videos detailing the completion of a trench built as well as garrison positions on "front lines" that needed improving. Another video showed a fighter

 $<sup>^{86}\</sup> https://ent.site intel group.com/Terrorism-Finance/despite-social-media-takedowns-western-jihadist-charity-offers-proof-of-successful-cryptocurrency-fundraising.html$ 

standing in what appears to be one of these garrison positions, thanking Al Sadaqah for their fundraising work toward the location and requesting more money from donors:

May peace and blessings be upon the prophet. We are your mujahideen brothers. We thank the brothers from Al Sadaqah for their help in reinforcing this guarding point, and we tell the brothers that we are in need of more donations, so we are able to stand firm against our enemy and to defend the Muslims and that we able to raise the Shahada flag.<sup>87</sup>



Al Sadaqah video (no audio provided) of garrisoned fighter thanking the group for donations and asking donors for more (February 2018)

Such donation solicitations were bolstered by Al Sadaqah's propaganda operation. The group created scores of photo reports and high-quality posters containing religious text about carrying out jihad. The graphics also contained contact information and a Bitcoin address. <sup>88</sup>

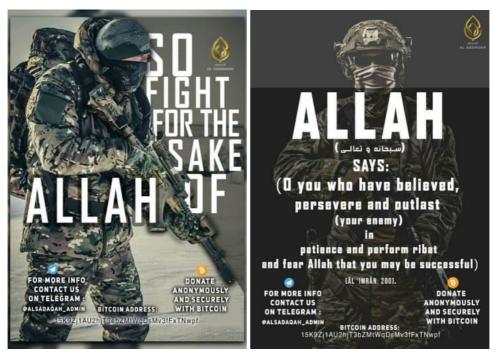


Stylized Al Sadaqah poster of militant, accompanied by a Bitcoin address (redacted) and Telegram contact information (published between December 2 and 13, 2017)

47

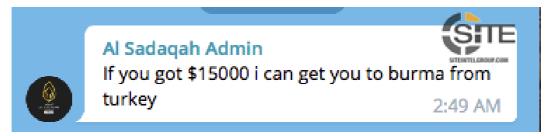
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/despite-social-media-takedowns-western-jihadist-charity-offers-proof-of-successful-cryptocurrency-fundraising.html

proof-of-successful-cryptocurrency-fundraising.html 88 https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/alleged-ngo-continues-raising-bitcoin-donations-for-syrianjihad-now-offers-to-smuggle-fighters.html



Stylized Al Sadaqah posters accompanied by a Bitcoin address and Telegram contact information (published between December 2 and 13, 2017)

Other illicit activity by Al Sadaqah has included at least one instance of offering to smuggle fighters from Myanmar to Turkey. In December 2017, the admin for the Al Sadaqah [Donations] chat room wrote, "If you got \$15000 I can get you to Burma from turkey." 89



Post by the administrator of Al Sadaqah's Telegram channel

# 5.2 Connection to Abu Ahmed Foundation

Al Sadaqah has on numerous occasions been linked to the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), a group run largely by Indonesians in Syria that functions as an unofficial propaganda and fundraising arm for HTS.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Terrorism-Finance/alleged-ngo-continues-raising-bitcoin-donations-for-syrian-jihad-now-offers-to-smuggle-fighters.html

In May 2018, Al Sadaqah announced a partnership with AAF for Ramadan, branded by both as part of a collaborative "Ribat [Garrison] Project" (spelled by AAF as "Ribath"). Posters for the collaborative project included both groups' logos and showed items donated to fighters. <sup>90</sup> One such poster described the project as:

Abu Ahmed Foundation Al Sadaqah Sinergy [sic]<sup>91</sup>



Promotional image for AAF and Al Sadaqah's "Ribat Project"

 $<sup>^{90}\</sup> https://ent.site intel group.com/Terrorism-Finance/pro-aq-indonesian-charity-distributes-weapons-funds-to-fighters-in-syria.html$ 

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Promotional image for AAF and Al Sadaqah's "Ribat Project"

Al Sadaqah has correspondingly acknowledged such collaboration with AAF. On September 21, 2018, for example, Al Sadaqah posted an image of a fighter holding a packaged military uniform. The post stated:

Al Sadaqah providing new uniforms to mujahideen with the help of AAF Donate now anonymously Contact: @alsadaqahsyria



Al Sadagah



07:16

Al Sadaqah providing new uniforms to mujihideen with the help of AAF.

Donate now anoymously

Contact: @alsadagahsyria

Al Sadaqah fundraising for "rebel factions" and working with "AAF" (September 21, 2018)

Further signaling the two groups' coordination was at least one instance of the same image being used in their propaganda. On June 6, 2018, AAF posted an image of a fighter described as "a mujahid turkman," stating of him:

it has been 10 days of ramadan on the front line of ribath which is located close to enemy territory. he did not open his shoes which were provided by AAF yesterday.

Of note, the same image was posted by Al Sadaqah, which provided a caption conveying the same information:

A Mujahideen who had spent some of the last 10 days of Ramadan defending the ummah in ribat.



Same picture with similar message posted by AAF (left) and Al Sadaqah (right) regarding a garrisoned fighter during Ramadan 2018

The relative transparency of Al Sadaqah provides thorough picture to donors of what they are contributing to. Like other militant-funding groups in Syria, including AAF, Al Sadaqah's priority on funding militant activity far outweighs that for humanitarian projects, making its agenda all the less ambiguous.

# 6. Conclusion

The intentions behind the defendant's donations to entities like Merciful Hands or Al Sadaqah, both holding ties to HTS, can only be known with certainty by the defendant. However, the nature of these groups, as this document has laid out, gives little room for one to credibly believe either of the two scenarios:

- 1. That such donations wouldn't be going toward militant jihad in Syria
- 2. That such donations wouldn't likely end up aiding HTS

The idea of giving to an organization like Merciful Hands strictly out of purely humanitarian motivations holds little weight when considering its activities. The group has partnered with AAF, an entity which has openly stated its "firm vow" to focus exclusively on "active mujahideen" while also publicly stating that they "stand with" HTS and propagating on behalf of the group. AAF's rhetoric included strongly implied allegiance to HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, whom AAF posted pictures of and referred to as "our shaikh [leader]." As for humanitarian support, AAF has openly refused that objective, pointing anyone looking to make "a more humanitarian"-natured donation elsewhere, as shown in this document.

Al Sadaqah, meanwhile, never needed to clarify its priority for militants because its regular photo reports, videos, and fundraising appeals confirmed exactly that. Further confirming Al Sadaqah's agenda was its openly stated collaboration with AAF, which was essentially an unofficial extension of HTS.

Adding yet more doubt to this idea is the fact that reputable organizations like the International Rescue Committee, CARE, and Save the Children maintain wide-reaching humanitarian aid networks both in Syria and surrounding countries like Jordan and Iraq. In stark contrast, networks shown by Merciful Hands appear almost entirely comprised of militants and their suppliers, financiers, associates, and supporters. These so-called charities offer no verifiable record of where their money goes, unlike the aforementioned NGOs. They are in most senses not actual charities, but rather entities created by individuals with no verifiable identities or mechanisms for accountability.

At the same time, it is doubtful that any individual actively engaged in the Syria-focused online extremist communities—in which these fundraising entities make their outreach—wouldn't have known how prevalent of a beneficiary HTS was of such operations. Even as charities claimed to be "independent" amid disputes between HTS other factions, it could often be easily deduced which faction(s) were receiving the majority of their money raised, whether it be by the other charities they partnered with or the content they posted online.

Their donors' intentions aside, Merciful Hands and Al Sadaqah have both held verifiable links to HTS, as seen in their publicly stated partnerships with AAF. Such connections considered, both

Merciful Hands and Al Sadaqah must be understood as components of a larger network of entities directly and/or indirectly aiding HTS and other terrorist entities in Syria.